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RUEHUJA/AMEMBASSY ABUJA PRIORITY 0641

RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 0046

RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH PRIORITY 0025

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 000462

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/FO, AF/W, AF/RSA, DRL, INR/AA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/03/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL SOCI NI

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN REACTIONS TO YAR'ADUA'S AILING HEALTH

REF: ABUJA 2174 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: CG Donna Blair; Reasons Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) Lagos has remained outwardly calm over the recent Eid-el-Kabir holiday weekend, and during the week of November 30 over reports of President Yar'Adua's ailing health. The main southern Nigerian preoccupation, if there is one apparent now, is speculation and concern over the staying power of Vice President Jonathan. Will the constitutionally-mandated succession apply, or will he be shoved aside? Southerners fear northerners will use this situation to their advantage, which could exacerbate the country's North-South divide and fuel tensions or unrest. Many observers -- foreign and domestic -- are counseling calm, as Nigeria seeks a soft landing or a way to peacefully muddle through Yar'Adua's plight and the impending constitutional succession and leadership crisis. END SUMMARY.

LAGOS AND ENVIRONS CALM

¶2. (C) Visible concern or sentiment has been muted in Lagos towards President Yar'Adua's ailing health. Lagosians and southerners are getting the news of his most recent hospitalization in Saudi Arabia from November 24 via the papers or other media, but the frenetic pace of this megacity is not noticeably different than "normal." It was festive on Wednesday, November 25, as Muslims queued up along Ikoyi's Bourdillon Road to buy goats and foodstuffs to celebrate Eid. Over the weekend, elegantly-dressed Muslims were out strolling, and people seemed complacent. There was also no discernible increase in police presence, at least during daylight hours. The usual traffic "go-slows" featured on Lagos and Victoria Islands. On Sunday, November 29, there was very busy and boisterous scene at the posh Palms mall in Lekki. This was a predominantly-Christian crowd doing Christmas shopping, but it likely included a large Muslim clientele out too on a Sunday afternoon, as many Christians were still in mega-churches nearby.

¶3. (C) ConGen Lagos PolOff travelled to Ijebu Ode in Ogun State for a festival marking Eid-el-Kabir involving homage to the traditional ruler. PolOff spent Saturday afternoon November 28 and Sunday morning November 29 with contacts, their families and associates in the State (a total of about

a dozen people). Discussions covered a variety of topics such as crime, kidnapping, local aspirations for their own state, the changing religious affiliation of the inhabitants (away from Islam and towards Christianity). However, the Nigerians notably did not raise the issue of Yar'Adua's health or concerns about the succession.

WHERE'S JONATHAN AND WILL HE LAST?

¶4. (S) If anything, southern speculation on the street and within the Lagos consular district centers on the staying power of Vice President Goodluck Jonathan. Several NGO contacts told PolOff and PolSpec on December 1 they are worried that the President's death or resignation could result in an intense power play between the North and South. One source said that he foresaw the possibility of a constitutional crisis should a section of the country insist on having Yar'Adua replaced by one of its own, in defiance of the constitution. (The Consul General's driver mentioned that the talk in his large mosque in Lagos' Obalende is that Governor of Kaduna is being groomed to replace the President.) The NGOs are also fearful that the state of the Yar'Adua's health could stall the ongoing debate on constitutional reform and several other reform processes Nigeria-wide.

¶5. (S) Dr. Chris Ekiyor, President of the Ijaw Youth Congress, called December 1 to ask what the USG thought of the situation. He said that the Ijaw nation is "just

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praying" that President Yar'Adua recovers. Ekiyor, who is a dental surgeon, said that if the President is truly suffering from pericarditis, that this is in itself not fatal. The issue remains if this is the whole story, or only part of it. Ekiyor claimed: if the President died in office and there was an attempt to alter the constitutional succession, and move aside ethnic Ijaw VP Jonathan, then there "would be trouble" among the Ijaws in the Niger Delta. He was not more specific about what form this "trouble" would take.

IN SEARCH OF A SOFT LANDING

¶6. (S) Consul General spoke December 3 with long-term resident Amcit Dick Kramer, who heads the American Business Council (ABC) and is active with the Nigeria Economic Summit Group (NESG). Over the past week the ABC has hosted a group of multinational potential investors from Europe, Nigeria and the United States who focused on the impact of the banking crisis and the prospective Petroleum Industry Bill. Kramer said there did not appear to be any concern or anxiety from among the visitors or his contacts vis-a-vis the current state of the President. He believed in the worst-case scenario that the constitutional transfer of power will go forward, although certain self-interested individuals for political reasons will attempt to "test the system."

¶7. (S) Patrick Naagbaton of the Center for Environment, Human Rights and Development told Lagos PolOff December 3 that he did not expect violence in the event of Yar'Adua's death in office. He believed the Nigerian elite would sort things out on their own without risking their revenues (i.e., disruption of oil flow and illegal bunkering income), adding that Nigerian politics were always difficult to predict. He also felt that a Jonathan Administration would not be that different from the Yar'Adua one namely, no strong central authority, a lot of behind-closed-doors infighting and intrigue, and an increasing decentralization of power.

¶8. (S) Professor Patrick Utomi, former presidential candidate in the 2007 election and director of the prestigious Lagos Business School, confirmed to ConGen Lagos

Pol/Econ Chief December 3 that he was one of the 55 prominent persons who put out a press release December 2 asking President Yar'Adua to resign. Utomi said the august group of 55 saw the need to persuade the president to step aside as a matter of urgency, so as to forestall certain elements in the military who might want to use this as an opportunity to seize power and take Nigeria down a similar path as Guinea. He added the group advocates that President Yar'Adua hand over the reins of power to Vice President Jonathan not because he inspires much confidence to lead Nigeria, but as a way to defuse tension and keep the country stable and calm.

BLAIR